

# ABSTRACT

## ***Background***

Autistic students are increasingly enrolling in higher education. However, their completion rates remain lower than that of their peers both with and without disabilities. Previous research has investigated the support needs of autistic students at university. However, a systematic literature review conducted by the researcher revealed there was a paucity of research, both nationally and internationally, exploring the experiences of autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university. The first year of university is critical for enabling successful university experiences for all students, with negative first year experiences resulting in negative impacts for students and universities alike.

The experience of transition to university does not occur in isolation. Throughout the transition period, students interact with family members, peers, friends, and university staff, with each interaction impacting on and influencing the student's experience. Previous research has highlighted the role of family support for autistic students during post-secondary education. In addition, autistic students are likely to engage with Disability Services and academic staff to request and access reasonable adjustments and accommodations. The current research sought to better understand these interactions, to identify barriers and facilitators to transition for autistic students. The bioecological theory model was used as a framework for exploring these factors at the individual, systemic and cultural level.

The lack of current research exploring the experiences of autistic students during their transition to university makes it difficult to establish evidence-based strategies to enable successful transition experiences for autistic students. Therefore, the current research addressed the gap in the existing literature by exploring the following question: *What are the facilitators and barriers to transition to university for autistic students in Australia?* The research question was addressed by considering the following three research objectives:

1. To explore the experiences of autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university;
2. To explore the experiences of family members supporting autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university;
3. To explore the experiences of university staff supporting autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university.

## ***Methodology and Methods***

The current research used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of autistic students and their support network members (e.g., family and university staff) during the transition to, and first year of university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight autistic students and six support network members from universities across Australia. In addition, online survey data were gathered from family members and university staff.

Student experiences were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to enable an in-depth and detailed exploration of their individual experiences. Support network members' experiences were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), to better understand their experiences of providing support to autistic students during their transition.

## ***Main Findings***

Findings identified factors at each of the bioecological theory model levels which can act as facilitators and barriers to transition, depending on the context within which they occurred. Using the bioecological theory model framework, the researcher has highlighted the interrelated nature of each of these factors. At the individual level, students identified the importance of sense of self and identity, and the challenges they experienced with help-seeking and disclosure. Students also demonstrated persistence and resilience in the ways they overcame barriers and challenges. The microsystem level highlighted the role of parents, friends, peers and university staff, and the existing lack of high school transition support in Australia. Additionally, findings showed that family and university staff work to balance the student's support need, with their right to autonomy and independence. At the mesosystem level, the research reinforced the impact of policies and legislation which prevent direct interaction between family members and university staff. Institutional policies and practices such as orientation and peer-mentoring programs were highlighted at the exosystem level, with students reporting mixed experiences of both. Participants also highlighted the benefits of autistic safe spaces on campus. Finally, the current research highlighted the importance of university-wide practices which support the inclusion of autistic students.

## ***Conclusion***

The current research contributes to existing understanding of the experiences of autistic university students, and highlights the complex interrelationship between individual, systemic, and cultural factors which impact on the experience of transition to university for autistic students. Findings provide a valuable evidence base for individual and systemic strategies, which will not only benefit autistic students, but other neurodivergent students, and students with disabilities more broadly.